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Nicolas de Largillierre, Portrait of the Young John Bateman as Cupid, ca. 1728-29

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Nicolas de Largillièrre
French (1656-1746)
Portrait of the Young John Bateman as Cupid, ca. 1728-29
Oil on canvas
53 ¾ x 41 ½ in.
Museum purchase, 2002.17

The eighteenth century French artist Nicolas de Largillièrre is well known for his portraits of the middle classes and nobility. *Portrait of the Young John Bateman as Cupid* is no exception. Like the subjects of many of Largillièrre's other paintings, John Bateman came from a family that was both wealthy and powerful. Despite the lack of maturity of the subject of this work, this portrait—thought to have been commissioned by his father, William 1st Viscount Bateman—sacrifices none of the grandeur and drama generally accorded to Largillièrre's other much older and established models. Under the brush of Largillièrre, the child characterized as little more than "the young John Bateman" transforms into nothing less than the Roman god of love.

This painting features Cupid surrounded by nature: by trees, earth, rocks, brush, the hint of water on the horizon, and a cloud filled sky. Apart from the objects that seemingly belong to him—a torch, a pouch filled with arrows, and the fabric that is draped around his small frame—there are no other signs of humanity or civilization. The link between Cupid and all that is natural is thus readily appreciable. This is not to imply, however, that nature shares the subject-position of this painting with Cupid. On the contrary, while natural elements are present all around Cupid, the colors, definition, and composition of this painting leave little doubt as to who is the true subject. Cupid stands in the foreground and occupies the near center of the image. The trees and brush serve to flank and frame both Cupid and his pouch of arrows. In contrast to the natural elements around him, which have the flat, under-nuanced quality of two-dimensional images, Cupid's body is outlined and contoured to such an extent that his muscles—more developed than his age might normally permit—are immediately perceptible. Against that backdrop, this child stands apart as supremely full and lifelike in comparison. The coloring of the painting reinforces his superiority over his surroundings. In his left arm, he cradles a long, gilded torch. His skin tone is bright white, rivaled only by the white of the flame of his torch and the foam of the distant surf. In contrast, the trees, earth, and rocks around him are predominately made up of shades of brown and muddied-yellows. Nature appears to function in the service of this boy-god; framing him, effacing itself before him, and allowing him to stand out as an illuminated figure against the gloom of the natural world.

The sky itself—covered as it is by heavy purple and slate grey clouds—is hardly a source of radiance. Perhaps no less so spiritually than physically. Almost equally divided in half by the horizon, Cupid—the half-child, half-winged spirit—is depicted here as capable of inhabiting both the terrestrial and the celestial worlds. However while he is able to exist simultaneously in both the natural and the super-natural world, it is he alone that embodies "the light." His divine primacy is further reinforced by the startlingly vibrant coral color of the fabric that is draped around the mid-section of his body. This color—part of the red family, and thus evocative of passion, love, and related notions—appears almost exclusively on his body. It is repeated in the blush of his cheeks and in the deep red of his lips. All of this suggests that if there is anything divine in this portrait, it is love. But it is not a distant, theoretical or academic type of love that is celebrated. Here, it is a love that is immediately palpable that is present to the spectator…or that will be immediately palpable. For the only real movement depicted in this portrait is that of Cupid reaching for his arrows. And his serene, knowing gaze is fixed on you.

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